

April 2013
New Series, 22:1



"Humor is a serious thing. I like to think of it as one of our greatest earliest natural resources, which must be preserved at all cost."

-James Thurber



OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN HUMOR STUDIES ASSOCIATION

Sponsored by: Department of English, Saint Louis University Graphic Design: Timmy Nelson Editor: Laurie Britt-Smith

Notes and News

Don't forget that AHSa has a new website: americanhumor.org. This site includes information on the society and *Studies in American Humor* with the aim of increasing our database of past journal issues, and expanding databases of past conferences, syllabi archives, and teaching materials - including sound files and videos. The website also maintains an updated listing of conference and journal CFPs. You can also now pay your membership dues online.

The website's growth depends on community involvement. If you have content to share or other information about the society that might be of interest, or have any questions or concerns about the website, please contact our Webmaster, Tracy Wuster, at: wustert@gmail.com.

If you are interested in reviewing books for *Studies in American Humor* or if you have a book you would like us to consider for review, please contact Tracy Wuster at: wustert@gmail.com

Do you have news or other information to share about a project or organization that you would like to see in print? Content, ideas, and other commentary for *To Wit* is always welcome. Send it to the editor at: LBrittsm@udmercy.edu

AHSA at American Literature Association 2013 24th Annual Conference Boston, MA May 23-26

Session 5-H Humor in American Periodicals

Chair: Tracy Wuster, The University of Texas at Austin
"Lewis Gaylor Clark (New York Knickerbocker), the Genealogy of American Comic Writing, and Comic Belles Lettres," James E. Caron, University of Hawaii at Manoa
" 'R-readin' in th' Pa-apers': Satire, Empire, and Finley Peter Dunne," Lucas Dietrich, University of New Hampshire
"American Humor Magazines at 248, Birthday Remarks" David E. E. Sloane, University of New Haven
Respondent: Judith Yaross Lee, Ohio University

Session 7-F Reading and Teaching Humorous Texts

Chair: Laurie Britt-Smith, University of Detroit Mercy
"Solipsistic Humor and the Advanced Composition Classroom: Teaching the Memoirs of Fey, Sedaris and Moran," Lisa Stein Haven, Ohio University Zanesville
"Should We Really Be Laughing? Teaching Satire and Humor in the Works of Sherman Alexie," Tara E. Friedman, Widener University
"Breaking Down Barriers One Laugh at a Time: American Muslim Stand-up Comedians and Social Satire in Post 9-11 America," Marissa Hicks-Alcaraz, University of California, Los Angeles

8-O Business meeting: Friday 9:40-11:00

Organized by the Mark Twain Circle of America

Session 15-C Mark Twain: Iconic Texts Reconsidered

Chair: Chad Rohman, Dominican University
"Mark Twain, Pudd'nhead Wilson, and Literary Property," Lawrence Howe, Roosevelt University.
"Hank Morgan: The Capitalist God," Connor McBrearty, University of Texas at San Antonio
"Death, Suffering and the Civil War in Mark Twain's The Innocents Abroad," Haein Park, Biola University

Session 17-C Mark Twain and History

Chair: Lawrence Howe, Roosevelt University
"History and Her Stories: Mark Twain, Mary Ann Cord, and Jane Lampton Clemens," Sharon McCoy, University of Georgia
"Exposing Hackmen and Demoralizers: Mark Twain's Punishment of San Francisco Beasts in 1864," Jarrod Roark, University of Missouri-Kansas City
"Humbug History in Tom Sawyer's Conspiracy," Alex Beringer, University of Montevallo

Organized by The Kurt Vonnegut Society

Session 14-A **"Goodbye, Blue Monday!" Breakfast of Champions at Forty**

Chair: Greg Sumner, Vice-President, Kurt Vonnegut Society
"Breakfast of Champions and Vonnegut's 'Unemancipated Characters,'" Stephen Hock, Virginia Wesleyan
"Vonnegut, Melville, and the Great American Con Game," Susan Dunston, New Mexico Tech
"The Synoptic Trout: The Problem of Vonnegut's Alter-Ego as a Consistent Identity," Jeffrey R. Villines, University of Virginia

Session 16-C **New Directions in Vonnegut Studies**

Chair: Marc Leeds, President, Kurt Vonnegut Society
"Vow-Prass: Satire and Ambiguity in the writing of Cat's Cradle," John Kofron, Indiana University
"Kurt Vonnegut in Croatia," Lavorka Gruic-Grmusica, University of Rijeka
"Genealogies of the Bahia de Darwin: Vonnegut's Anthropology," Abhijeet Paul, University of California Berkeley

Other Conferences and Organizations of Interest

The 2013 International Society for Humor Studies Conference

will be held from July 2 to July 6, 2013, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia. Information about this and other upcoming conferences and the ISHS can be found at: www.hnu.edu/ishs

The 2014 Annual Australasian Humour Studies Network Colloquium will take place in Wellington, New Zealand, 14-15 February, at the National Library. The conference theme will be *Anything Goes*.

Papers will be welcome on any humor-related topic, but particularly on the limits of humor and about those occasions when professional and everyday humorists go too far. For more information: www.sydney.edu.au/humourstudies

National Cartoonist Society
www.reuben.org
www.cartoonistfoundation.org

The National Cartoonist Society (NCS), founded in 1947, is rich in both history and talent. It serves three primary purposes:

- To advance the ideals and standards of professional cartooning in its many forms.
- To promote and foster a social, cultural and intellectual interchange among professional cartoonists of all types.
- To stimulate and encourage interest in and acceptance of the art of cartooning by aspiring cartoonists, students and the general public.

The society boasts over 500 members of professional, established artists that work in traditional and digital mediums. Their primary site (reuben.org) offers continually updated blogs and newsfeeds about cartooning, as well as links to a variety of research databases, museums, and international cartoonist's societies. In 2005, the NCS Foundation became the official arm of the society's charitable functions. They provide educational programs through organizations such as the Ohio State University Cartoon Research Library (<http://cartoons.osu.edu/>). The NCS has also established the Jay Kennedy Scholarship in memory of the late King Features editor. The \$5000 award is given to the best college cartoonist as a means to continue and strengthen the profession.



Corner Conversation

Although we value the research members of the AHSA produce, one of our most important conversations has to be about pedagogy. How do we go about using humorous texts in the classroom? What texts, be they printed, aural, visual, or some combination thereof do we use to demonstrate and define the concept of American humor? What connects with students and what do we do when our students just don't "get it?"

With that in mind, we feature one response to the question and ask you to respond in kind. You can write a reply for *To Wit*, submit your materials and suggestions to our website americanhumor.org, or go to the fantastically useful site where the original post is found and comment directly to the author. (If you take that final option, we do hope you will also Cc us!)

Teaching American Humor: What Should Be Taught?

By Jeffery Melton – Reprinted with permission from *Humor in America* (humorinamerica.com) Edited for space.

Here is your challenge: come up with a syllabus of material for a course on American Humor. Good luck with that.

Where to begin? What to include? Why a duck?

What I propose is an American Humor... (wait for it)... Canon. If you are opposed to the rigid, standard-bearing, pomposity of the word, I understand. If you couldn't care less and figure any guidance at all that may help you put together a class (or many classes) would be useful, then I greet you as a kindred soul.

This may start a fight. That is not what I am seeking, but I figure a discussion on anything but presidential politics may be welcome. There is no getting around the fact that such an enterprise forces limitations. I always tell students (in all courses) that I could easily put together multiple sections of the course without duplicating anything. That is not to intimidate them with the frightful power of my brain (that comes later); it is merely to confess up front that I am playing a bit of a shell game. Generally, they don't mind. They embrace my "less is more" philosophy and often suggest an even more streamlined syllabus. Great kids, all around.

So, what should be taught?

I will serve up my neck with a few suggestions and wait for others to respond. I currently teach a course called "American Popular Humor," and I am quite fond of it. I added the "popular" to be able to focus on works that have enduring and widespread appeal because, first, that interested me; second, it gave me some cover for leaving out works that I had never heard of. That statement has all the marks of a sound decision. I do not offer this as an ideal or even finished course; rather, I include it here simply to provide a reference point.

I divide the course into thirds: 1) **prose and performance**; 2) **film comedy**; and 3) **situation comedy**. Now, you can start being appalled at how much I have already left out simply by stating three general categories. It gets worse.

Here is my list of required material for prose and performance:

Washington Irving
Fanny Fern
Mark Twain
Charles Chesnutt
Dorothy Parker
Erma Bombeck
George Carlin
Richard Pryor
Eddie Murphy
Margaret Cho

("Oh, my. That's it?")

("Uh, yes. Actually, there is one person listed above that I never get to. Not telling which.")

Here are the films I require students to watch:

Modern Times

Duck Soup

Animal Crackers

It Happened One Night

Raising Arizona (I cheat a little here by including this film. It did not enjoy mass popularity. I rest the case on the overall success of the Coen brothers. No apologies)

Here are the television situation comedies we cover:

I Love Lucy

The Beverly Hillbillies

All in the Family

The Cosby Show

("Four?")

("Four. ... I know. They watch five episodes from each. So that's twenty, a larger number.")

In each section, students can add material to discuss, and, of course, I make references throughout to other works within each category. The paltry lists above represent my tough choices. This task requires choices; it requires elevating some works and dismissing others. The list I am hoping for, though, can be much larger—and must be. I am curious to see if we can develop some kind of consensus with some thoughtful contention as well. I invite anyone to chime in whether you teach or not. My hunch is that we could develop a canon that is expansive without being amorphous and virtually useless. I have never seen an anthology that came close to what I would want as a resource for my students. And, of course, reading is only part of the material that must be considered.

I humbly suggest a few of my choices above. What are yours? I wonder. Which writers and performers are of first rank among the vast and formidable history of American Humor? Who is essential, what works are definitive, and which forms of humorous expression best exemplify the tradition and texture of the funniest nation in the world?

Pocket Book Reviews

By Kalman Goldstein

Martell, Nevin. *Looking for Calvin and Hobbes: The Unconventional Story of Bill Watterson and His Revolutionary Comic Strip*. New York, Continuum, 2009. 248 pages. ISBN 978-0-82642-983-1. Hardcover. \$27.95.

Bill Watterson abruptly ended his celebrated decade-long strip in 1995, but *Calvin and Hobbes* continues a best seller through its book compilations (over 30 million copies to date). *Cleveland Plain Dealer* journalist Martell, widely published on popular

culture, seeks to celebrate as well as explain Calvin. The book has four topics: biographical information, autobiographical information, analysis by other cartoonists, and trying to contact Calvin's reclusive creator. He failed in that last attempt. Parents and hometown friends zealously guard Watterson's privacy; however, he did cajole an interview with his mother. So much effort is spent on charting that quest that Martell's "looking" sometimes subordinates his "finding." But the book's true strength lies in directly examining the strip and suggesting why its humor still resonates.

One admirer has proclaimed *Calvin and Hobbes* "Doonesbury for kids." But, much more minimalist than Trudeau or similar comic strip innovators Gary Larson and Berke Breathed, Watterson focused primarily on a boy with his "toy" tiger buddy, occasionally refracting his daydreams, fantasies, and "magical thinking" through bemused parents, teachers, baby sitter, girl-next-door Susie, and school bully Moe. Readers empathized with Calvin's naked Id only modulated by childish innocence; Martell compiles appropriate adjectives and adverbs to suggest how and why the humor works.

Through ten chapters, Martell combines biography, interviews, Watterson's stingy explication of his humor, and his own worship of but unsuccessful attempts to reach the cartoonist. He appends a bibliography, but includes no illustrations, which is incredibly frustrating in a book about cartoon humor.

Monks, Christopher, editor. *The McSweeney's Book of Politics and Musicals*. New York: Vintage. 2012. ISBN: 978-0-307-38734-9. 348 pages. Paperback. \$14.95.

Seventy-seven writers, for television, *The Onion*, the daily *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* website, as well as stand-up comics and freelancers, have contributed over 100 "bits" to this satirical collection. Parodies, lampoons, and burlesque musicals skewer not only current political leaders, but the clichés of contemporary campaigning and punditry which express or feed on their activities. From press releases to concession speeches, lobbying pressures to "massaged" polls, simplistic slogans to fill-in-the-blanks op-ed pieces, the book offers a cavalcade of put-downs of the transiently powerful or notorious, implicitly offering the balm that in a decade or so, the reader might be hard pressed to recognize some of the names referred to. By presenting their follies through the medium of similarly transient popular culture, they equate the likes of Ann Coulter and Harold Camping, George Tenet and Rick Santorum, with television shows like *16 and Pregnant*, *The Hills*, or *Crate & Barrel* commercials.

Most targets are on the Right, but having so many contributors' means that a wide net is cast. Gaffes by Sarah Palin and Donald Rumsfeld do not monopolize the pages, as the "Occupy" movement, Obama's first campaign, and the Administration's Health Care legislation are also pilloried. Because so many examples are represented, some pieces are unsubtle diatribes. It is noteworthy how many use anachronism or more inventive approaches to make a point: one of the most fascinating of these may be "How Bernanke Tackled the Depression, as Recorded 150 Years from Now by Post-Apocalyptic Hobo Folklorists." *Aesop's Fables* offer children a primer on voter suppression. Other examples include using such classics as *The Federalist Papers*, *Atlas Shrugged*, or *Silent Spring* to comment on current atrocious behavior or muddle-headed policies. However, it's hard to beat "Weiner! The Musical", which ties together a sextet of recent (bi-partisan) and eminently forgettable office-holding sex offenders in rollicking couplets.



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American Humor Studies Association New and Renewal Membership Application

Membership in the American Humor Studies Association includes the semi-annual newsletter, *To Wit*, and the annual journal, *Studies in American Humor*, on an as-issued basis.

To join:

Send a \$25 check (\$30 for international; \$10 for student) to:

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Or

Join electronically via Americanhumor.org

Enroll / Renew me as a member in the American Humor Studies Association, please.

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